

**Developing an Effective Tracking and Improvement system for Learning and Teaching:
Achievements and Future Challenges in Maintaining Academic Standards**

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Think: Education Group

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Abstract

Improving learning and teaching outcomes has been a recent focus in the Australian higher education sector. In addition to a university's internal quality systems, the Australian government also uses a number of key performance indicators to monitor and reward public universities.

Whilst private higher education providers are also required to report on learning and teaching performance to the State/Territory governments and internally within the organisation, there has been little research in this area – despite the growing prevalence of Australian private higher education. In 2000, only 0.3% (2450) of total higher education enrolments in Australia was in private higher education and there were only six accredited providers. By 2007, enrolments had increased to 5% (53060) of total higher education enrolments in Australia. Based on the 2008 figures, the enrolments in private higher education have increased by 20.8% compared to the 2007 figures (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). The number of private higher education providers has also increased exponentially: from the original six in 2000 to approximately 150 in 2009 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Based on this trend it is predicted that by 2020 private higher education in Australia will contribute approximately thirty percent of total higher education enrolments in Australia.

The paper outlines the systems and processes implemented in a private higher education college to systematically track and improve learning and teaching performance. The use of both quantitative and qualitative measures currently used in one private higher education college to track and improve the performance in learning and teaching is discussed. The paper also discusses the effectiveness of using the tracking and improvement system implemented and the feedback received in the recent external quality audit of the college by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).

The paper concludes with a critique on some key challenges facing Australian private higher education institutions in maintaining high academic standards comparable to those in universities.

Keyword: Tracking and Improvement in Learning & Teaching, Academic Standards in Private Higher Education.

Introduction

Learning and teaching is one of the core businesses of higher education institutions. Higher education institutions in Australia and around the world use a number of performance indicators to track and improve outcomes with comparative benchmarks. While universities in Australia have been satisfied with the outcomes on various indicators, recent policies related to performance monitoring have resulted in the benchmarking of public university performance data on some measures, and linking financial reward with positive outcomes. Similar policy initiatives are also implemented in the United Kingdom where the result of the National Student Survey (NSS) of all higher education institutions is used to monitor and reward institutions.

There is no doubt that future funding and reward of public universities will be directly linked to a number of agreed quantitative measures. In addition, the performance data will be available in the public domain for prospective and current students to review. While institutions have internal systems and processes to track and improve the quality of learning and teaching outcomes – external drivers such as government policies to reward institution-based agreed measures, external quality audits and increased stakeholder demand for quality have played a vital role in strengthening learning and teaching outcomes.

Learning and teaching performance measures in public universities are the subject of much research, however there is limited literature on the systems and processes used in private higher education to track and improve the quality of learning and teaching outcomes. Such research is vital based on the growth of private higher education in Australia and to ensure academic rigor and improved academic standards across all higher education institutions.

Overview on the Growth of Private Higher Education: International

Australian research conducted on the growth of private higher education correlates with that of the overseas experience. According to Mok (2009), private higher education in China constituted over 1.4 million students (10.4%) of total higher education enrolments across 1300 private higher education providers in 2004. In Korea, 85.1% of all colleges and universities are private (Lee 2008). Similar figures emanate from India which has an annual output of close to 2.5 million graduates from almost 20,000 private colleges. Research by Tilak (2008) shows that the pattern of growth in higher education in India is towards private universities and private colleges, with public universities and colleges experiencing slow growth.

A study by Oketch (2009) of three East African countries (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) showed rapid growth of private higher education. Similar growth was also experienced in the United States of America with 702,000 (4.2%) of total higher education enrolments in 2003 (Lee 2008). Similarly research in Malaysia has found 666 private higher education institutions with 232,069 student enrolments in 2001 (Saeed & Sohail, 2003).

Briefing Overview of the Private College

Think: Education Group is located in New South Wales (Sydney) with campuses in Brisbane and Melbourne. The Group consists of eight colleges, offering government accredited English languages courses, higher education and vocational education courses in different disciplines, from Post Graduate Diploma to Certificate III courses. Most courses are accredited for delivery to both domestic and overseas students. The Group has close to 1,200 higher education students. The vision of the Group is to *Create the new standard in applied education*. Almost all higher education courses have engaged learning component (e.g. practicum, internships, and industry placements) embedded into the curriculum.

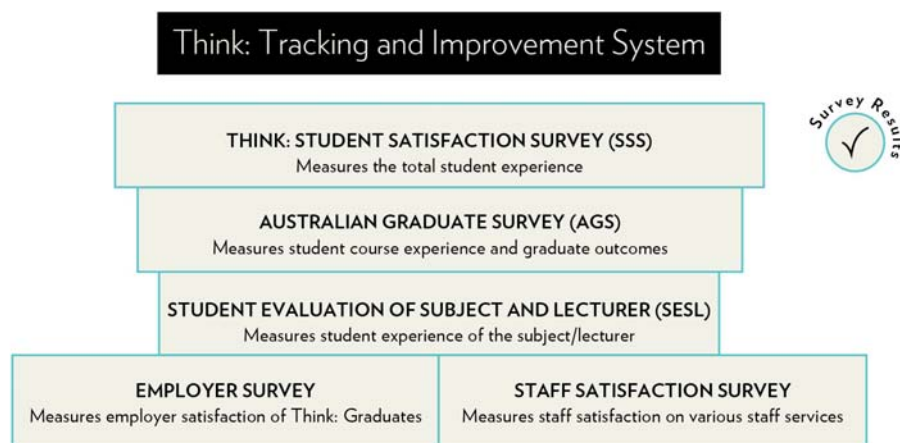
Tracking and Improvement System

The tracking and improvement system described in this section of the paper was developed and implemented in 2008, based on the findings from a Group wide self assessment. The aim of the self assessment was to identify areas of good practice and areas where improvement was needed. One of the identified improvements was to develop and implement a robust tracking and improvement system for learning and teaching.

The Group benchmarked systems used by other universities based on good practices available in the AUQA Good Practice database. The Think: Tracking and Improvement system is part of the organisation's Strategic Planning and Quality Management framework. The main aim for the development of the system is to measure the quality of learning and teaching outcomes, and to use this evidence to improve performance.

The Tracking and Improvement system at Think: Education Group includes both quantitative and qualitative measures. Figure 1 outlines the Think: Tracking and Improvement system.

Figure 1: Think: Tracking and Improvement System



Quantitative Measures

The Group measures stakeholder satisfaction at three levels. This includes measurement of students' *overall experience* of their college, their *course level experience* and also at *teacher/subject level*. The growth and massification of higher education requires institutions to track and improve student satisfaction and improve learning and teaching outcomes such as retention, student engagement and other indicators. According to Alves & Raposo (2007), it is a fundamental necessity to analyse and study students' satisfaction in higher education, as the dissatisfaction of students could have ominous consequences for both the institution and the students, including for example unsuccessful students (Wiese, 1994, Walther, 2000), students quitting or transferring (Chadwick & Ward, 1987; Dolinsky, 1994; Thomas *et al.*, 1996; Astin, 2001) and 'negative word of mouth' harming future applications (Ugolini, 1999). Conversely, say Alves & Raposo (2007), institutions of higher education with satisfied students could greatly benefit from being able to establish lasting relationships with their graduates.

The Group uses the biennial Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS) with a representative sample of students to measure their overall experience of the college in teaching, course outcomes and all support services areas. Many universities have approached the process of better understanding and meeting the needs of their students through student surveys. These surveys serve numerous purposes such as development and enhancement of learning and teaching (Fraser 1998; Marsh, 1987 & Griffin *et al*, 2003). The Group internally benchmarks the results with all other Think: Colleges who offer different disciplines and levels of qualification including higher education and vocational education. A sub-sort analysis of domestic and overseas students is also undertaken and the most recent result shows comparable student satisfaction between the two cohorts.

The Group participates in the annual Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) which measures graduate satisfaction at course level. The core items in the AGS-CEQ are similar to the SSS items which enable the Group to benchmark the satisfaction of currently enrolled and graduating students. The Group benchmarks its CEQ and GDS results with all participating providers including universities and other private colleges. Based on the 2008 results, the Group performed 10 per cent higher than the sector average (explicit satisfaction – percentage marking 4-5) on good teaching (66 per cent) and overall satisfaction scale (82 per cent). In terms of the generic skills scale, the Group performs slightly higher (2 per cent)

compared to the sector. Student achievement of key generic skills after completion of the course is an area needing improvement and further research in private higher education.

At the teaching and subject level, the Group uses the Student Evaluation of Subject and Lecturer (SESL) survey. SESL is a combined instrument which measures student satisfaction of the teacher and subject. SESL is administered each trimester and each college's report benchmarks their results against: Think: Colleges overall results; each of the other participating colleges; and individual subject and lecturer results. The SESL results are reported using traffic light colour codes with explicit criteria. The Group provides the quantitative and qualitative reports to all colleges within five weeks after the cut off date of the surveys.

One of the key components of the tracking and improvement system is the use of the Employer Survey. This survey enables the Group to collect feedback from employers on the extent to which they believe Think: graduates possess the key generic skills rated by them – the graduate employers - as most important in early career graduates. The survey is targeted to employers who have recruited Think: graduates and employers who have engaged currently enrolled students as part of practicum and internships.

The Group also conducts staff surveys to gather feedback on a range of areas including communication, leadership, professional development and performance reviews.

The data from various surveys are also part of the Group's Educational Key Performance Indicators (EKPIs) which are reported to the Academic Board. The EKPIs include trend performance data in areas such as: staff-student ratio, staff satisfaction, staff qualifications, retention and completion rates, student satisfaction in SSS, CEQ, SESL, student grievances, graduate employment, employer satisfaction, and percentage of courses with engaged learning component.

The approach used by the Group is in line with previous research recognising that higher education, as part of the human services industries, is placing greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of students, as well as responding to the need of other stakeholders such as employers and the broader society (Carroll, 2005; Cheng & Tam, 1997;

Griffin, Coates, McInnis & James, 2003; Lee, Jolly, Kench & Gelonesi, 2000; Nair & Blackwell, 2005; Nair & Chan, 2005; Ramsden, 2005).

Qualitative Measures

The Group uses a number of qualitative measures to track and monitor its performance in learning and teaching. As a private higher education provider, all higher education courses are accredited by the State/Territory government on five year cycle. The accreditation process involves external peer assessment in the form of an assessment panel. The assessment panel consists, at a minimum, of a Vice Chancellor's Committee's representative, an academic specialist and a representative from an industry/professional body. The accreditation process works to ensure the course's are 'fit for purpose' to meet the changing needs of the industry; academics from other universities are required to assess the quality and standard of the academic programme and support services available for students, against MCEETYA's *National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes*

The second qualitative measure is the engagement of Course Advisory Committees (CAC) in the course development, and monitoring and review processes. Course Advisory Committees consist of both internal and external academics and industry partners. Each Course Advisory Committee works with their colleges to ensure the courses meet the needs of the industry and professions, and that academic standards are equivalent to that of universities.

Another qualitative measure is assessment moderation. The Group has been involved in assessment moderation with two public universities and one private higher education institution. Random samples of marked student assessments are selected and blind marked by peers from these other institutions. In most cases the marks awarded by the teachers at Think: Colleges are comparable to those marked by peers. Assessment moderation has played a vital role in ensuring that the Group's approach to assessments is comparable to other institutions and academic standards are maintained.

Benchmarking is one of the key components of the quality management framework. The Group is engaged in benchmarking performance data, curriculum and both academic and non-academic processes.

Culture of Compliance to Improvement

Most private higher education colleges in Australia started operations as vocational education providers. Quality assurance in vocational education and training is guided by the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). The AQTF is a compliance driven system which ensures that organisations have systems and processes in place to ensure a quality teaching and learning experience. A significant loophole in the AQTF is monitoring the extent to which the systems and processes (e.g. policies) are implemented consistently with a college. When the regulatory framework allowed, some of the private vocational education providers successfully registered to become higher education providers. Participation in this sector requires a different approach to managing quality teaching and learning systems. Higher education external quality audits up until 2009 are based on the principle of ‘fitness for purpose’ and audit includes a focus on compliance, institutional systems and processes to achieve its objectives, mission and quality improvements; the AQTF audit on the other hand is heavily driven by compliance.

The implementation of the tracking and improvement system in the Think: Education Group is slowly changing the operational and academic culture in those colleges from one of compliance to one focussing on continuous improvement. The use of performance data has enabled Heads of Colleges and individual academics to review the performance of the college and set targets for the future. Evidence based decision making has been a key change in various colleges to improve performance in learning and teaching.

Closing the Loop

A key element of the Group’s quality management framework is the principles and practices associated with ‘*closing the loop*’. To this end, a number of different activities are undertaken. At the end of each year, survey results are reviewed to identify key recurring themes that need improvement. The Director, Quality and Improvement schedules meeting with each college head to review the results and identify key improvement strategies. The improvements from all colleges are discussed and endorsed by the Quality Committee. The Group organises posters (*Feedback – It Matters*) in partnership with the Student Representative Council to communicate improvements with all students. Posters are placed in classrooms and student support areas to raise student awareness of the improvement planned or underway. Leckey and Neil (2001) argue that ‘closing the loop’ is an important issue in terms of total quality management.

If students do not see any actions resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate. Powney and Hall (1998) suggest that students are less likely to take the time and effort to complete questionnaires if they feel that the survey is a simple meaningless, result-less, ritual that the institution goes through in order to meet quality assurance procedures.

Does it add any value?

While the tracking and improvement system implemented across the Think: Education Group is fairly new, there is recognition within the Group that the use of timely and reliable performance data informs priorities to enhance student experience. The survey results since 2008 have shown trend improvement in both teaching and support services area at the overall, course and teacher/subject level. Think: Group was audited by AUQA in July, 2009. The outcome of the audit affirmed that the Group has effective quality management practices in place to assure the quality of governance, academic programmes and various support services. AUQA commended the college for its self review process, engagement of industry in course design, the Groups' approach to survey and improvements, assessment moderation practices, the Groups' approach to engaged learning and the success in benchmarking initiatives. The external quality audit of the Group which involved the panel meeting close to 80 staff and students found high level of staff awareness of the quality management system. AUQAs comments in relation to quality management 'AUQA commends Think: Colleges Pty Ltd for its approach to quality management and in particular the use of performance data, and internal and external benchmarking' (Think: Colleges AUQA audit report, 2009, pp26).

Academic Standards and Future Challenges for Private Higher Education

The Bradley Review of Higher Education heralds significant changes for all higher education institutions with the years 2010-2013. Performance-based rewards on meeting agreed measures, mission based compacts funding, together with the new Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) will have huge impact on universities. The move from 'fitness for purpose' to an academic standards quality audit by the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) signals rigorous and stringent regulations for public and private higher education. Recent media news on the quality of private colleges, value for money for the degrees offered and international student issues will also contribute to drive change in the regulation of private colleges.

A recent media article promulgated by a prominent Vice Chancellor expressed concerns around the lack of government planning and/or consistent regulation of private higher education. In November 2004, the Australian newspaper reported that the offshore component of Australian private higher education was an area of risk and needed to be monitored. The National Union of Students recently argued that students have many concerns relating to courses delivered by private colleges and a mismatch between course's content and marketing (The Australian, 2008).

Private higher education faces significant challenges in meeting high quality standards comparable to those offered by universities. The Commonwealth government target for achieving 300,000 graduates by 2025 may include the funding for reputable private colleges to assist the Commonwealth reach that target. In recent media, the Commonwealth Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations made a strong comment on the quality and credibility of Australian qualifications:.

We want our child not just to graduate but to obtain a qualification recognised as amongst the best in the world. When he applies for a job he will likely be facing overseas competitors and we want him, if he chooses, to be able to have the excellence of his own qualifications recognised overseas (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009)

The maturation of continuous improvement strategies in universities has led to some significant gains in improving student learning experiences and outcomes in university sector. Private higher education providers, on the other hand, are emerging from a different educational culture and are now tackling those issues with quality previously faced by their university peers. A review of 13 AUQA audit reports indicate the following as areas that private higher education providers will have to address - either as a sector, or institution by institution - to be in a similar position as their university peers in ensuring high academic standards and comparable student achievements.

Institutional Governance

Institutional governance in the academic area plays a key role in ensuring thorough and rigorous academic processes. An Academic Board and its sub-committees are accountable to ensure that academic programmes and processes are comparable and equivalent with other

higher education institutions. The extent to which an Academic Board can make independent decisions is inconsistent between private higher education providers. The AUQA audit reports of private higher education colleges audited to date confirms the need to ensure that the Academic Board is independent and their decisions are not influenced by either the Board of Directors and/or owners of the college. In some instances colleges have grown significantly from vocational to higher education and in across jurisdictions; however the growth has not taken into account a review of governance structure.

Academic Leadership

The learning and teaching pedagogies in higher education are different from those used in vocational education. Academic leaders with proven experience in teaching, research and managing staff and courses or units bring significant experience. The AUQA audit reports recognise that in some private colleges, whilst Heads of Colleges and Program Directors have experience in managing vocational colleges and programs, they have limited higher education academic leadership experience. To ensure high academic standards, any proposed regulatory framework for higher education providers will need to emphasise the recruitment, selection and retention of suitably qualified academic leaders.

Use of Sessional Lecturers

Sessional teaching staff with current industry experience allows teaching staff to share the most current trends and changes in industry professional practice. However the use of sessional teaching staff also raises issues around quality assurance. According to (Yorke, 2008), marks given to students on assessment by different sessional teachers vary and there is a lack of a consistent approach across various disciplines, faculties and across institutions. Almost 95% of teaching staff in private colleges are sessional and they are involved in preparing learning materials, assessments, marking of student assessments and other administrative work. Sessional teachers can also be engaged in either full time or part time employment in other (academic/non-academic) organisations. The AUQA audit of private colleges identified that in some cases teachers who are teaching vocational courses are also teaching higher education courses with lower qualifications making the point that curriculum, teaching methods and assessments are completely different in the vocational and higher education sectors.

Research and Culture of Critical Inquiry

One of the fundamental roles of higher education is to advance knowledge, understanding and ‘contributing to an improved national economy through high levels of skills, knowledge and research’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007). Teaching in higher education is normally informed by research to bring new knowledge to students. AUQA audit reports indicate an inconsistent application of resources and infrastructure to support research, publications and culture of critical inquiry. There is also inconsistent support for staff to undertake research degree such as study leave and participation in conferences to present papers. There seems to be a lack of a research culture in private colleges, with an emphasis on teaching only.

Rigorous Academic Processes

The ongoing maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards is based on the extent to which institutions have rigorous academic processes. While private colleges have adequate policies and procedures, the extent to which they are implemented at college level is inconsistent. Again, the AUQA audit process identified instances where policies are reviewed and approved by individuals without the endorsement of a college’s academic board or other committees. All higher education courses offered by private colleges are accredited by the State/Territory governments. Any changes in the curriculum, learning outcomes and assessments have to be approved by course advisory committees and other academic committees. In some instances changes happen at college level without the approval of the academic committees.

Maximising Profit (Growth vs Academic Standards)

The provision of private higher education is based on the income generated by student fees. The average tuition fee for an undergraduate degree for domestic students is about \$40,000. While student numbers have grown significantly, there has been a lack of focus on aligning support services to meet the growing core business (learning and teaching) of the colleges. AUQA audit outcomes make the point that adequate resourcing of teaching and learning is a fundamental requirement of providing a quality student experience. AUQA notes that those private colleges whose overseas student profile exceeds 50% are managing a high level of risk, particularly where courses offerings are linked to Australian government migration policies. The adequacy of library resources, regular consultation between students and academic staff and the quality of student support services needs ongoing review and improvement.

According to Mok (2009), quality issues surrounding Australian private higher education provision have resulted in student protests in China about excessive student fees, quality of teaching, status of the degree being offered and a mismatch between promises and the reality after graduation. Salient lessons could be learned from the Polish experience which shows that private higher education may have negative impacts including low standards of teaching, institutions focusing on maximising profits with many institutions experiencing serious staff shortages and a narrow focus on institutional governance (Jalowiecki 2001).

Student Assessments

It is widely recognised that student assessments play a vital role in the attainment of learning outcomes and student achievement of generic skills. Student assessment is also a key component in ensuring high academic standards. A summary of AUQA findings would suggest that to improve the quality and standards of academic programmes delivered by private colleges, and to ensure its comparability with universities, private colleges have to improve assessment practices generally. The use of external examining in United Kingdom (UK) continues to be seen as an essential to the process of ensuring that the degree awarded by UK higher education institutions are of an appropriate academic standard (Hannan & Silver, 2006). Academic standards around overseas students is particularly related to the ‘soft marking of student assessment’, and is evident in both public and private higher education provision. Devos (2003) reports staff in a university claimed that students are recruited with inadequate English skills and that ‘failures’ are being upgraded to passes or higher to protect the student’s position in the university.

Course Delivery Methods

The last decade has seen a rise in the delivery of courses in different modes. The use of technology and paper based distance learning has grown dramatically. The reduced duration and nominal teaching hours have contributed to fast track and accelerated learning in many institutions including private colleges and universities. While different delivery modes suits the diverse student groups, the mode of learning and reduced duration of courses raises issues around quality and standards. What systems need to be in place to ensure that the three year face-to-face Bachelor of Commerce at higher education provider *x* is comparable to the fast tracked online degree at higher education provider *y*?

Admission Criteria and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Positive outcomes in learning and teaching such as high retention rates are based on student admissions criteria. Student admissions standards in private colleges are lower than those of universities, providing access to students otherwise unable to gain a place at a university. Based on the marketing material and course prospectus reviewed as part of this paper, entry criteria for domestic students in undergraduate courses is, on average, 60 UAI. According to (Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997), academic rigor should not limit educational access and opportunity for non-traditional students and simply mandate particular outcomes without considering the means of getting students to greater learning. To achieve high academic standards and academic rigor, private colleges need to ensure that the means (enabling support systems) are adequate to support students and maximise their opportunities for success.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) practices are entrenched in the competency based training and assessment environment from which many private higher education providers came. AQUA has noted that the adaption of these practices to the principles of course credit has been inconsistent across the private higher education sector (and that the management of RPL and course credit is also inconsistent across universities). In some cases students are assessed based on work experience, preparation of portfolios and other evidence which accounts more than 50 per cent of course credit. There seem to be a lack of a consistent approach to the granting of course credit and appropriate guidelines to assess students based on previous learning and work experience. The verification of overseas qualifications to assess RPL and academic credit also needs improvement.

Equity and Diversity

Private colleges have provided an alternative choice to students. It has also provided diversity in course offerings with some colleges offering specialised courses such as theology. Higher education should be equitable to all groups of students particularly students from various equity groups who have been disadvantaged in past. The participation of Indigenous students, students with disability and students from low socio economic background is significantly lower and in some cases zero compared to universities. Higher education should be accessible to all groups of students and it should provide equitable education to full fill the moral purpose of education institutions.

Conclusion

The growth of private higher education in Australia is inevitable. Such growth is also experienced in many other countries. Private higher education has played a key role in addressing skills shortages and meeting the needs of relevant professions and industry such as design, counselling, hospitality, theology and others. The growth of private higher education can be attributed to government policies related to higher education, migration policies, growing Australian population and student's unmet demand to access higher education. Along with the challenges of meeting the needs of increased numbers of students, the sector as a whole faces significant challenges as a result of higher education reforms initiated by the current Australian government. Such reforms are timely to ensure that Australian higher education is competitive, credible, comparable to other developed countries, accessible to the most disadvantaged groups and that it meets the changing needs of the government, employers, industry and the broader society.

The use of performance data to track and improve performance is important to ensure that students and employers are satisfied with the quality and standard of education and the standard of graduates ready for employment.

The accreditation and external scrutiny of private higher education will be more robust in coming years to ensure that the quality and standard of education is comparable to those offered by universities. Student achievement of generic or employability skills in private education will be a key focus to ensure that graduates achieve the skills and attributes rated by employers as most important.

The new external auditing agency (TEQSA) will have powers to register and de-register on those providers who do not demonstrate quality, standards and agreed outcomes.

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